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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges"

Statement submitted by Zonta International, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

The priority theme of the fifty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women is one that is particularly important in the light of the many challenges that rural women face owing to many factors, including the current combined effects of worldwide economic instability and climate change, both of which exacerbate the poverty that such women are already experiencing.

In 1995, in the Beijing Platform for Action, it was emphasized that policies to improve the circumstances of women in rural areas needed to be formulated and, most importantly, that those policies needed to be implemented. The areas of special interest at that time included rural women's access to resources such as land, credit, technology and decent employment. The need for rural women to be part of decision-making processes was noted, as was their accessibility to education and health services.

Along with the Beijing Platform for Action, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women specifically calls for States to guarantee to protect the human rights of rural women and their equal access to land, markets, health-care facilities, training, education and decent living conditions.

Most families in developing countries rely on agriculture to sustain them. As a consequence, women in rural areas must take part in farming work while maintaining and caring for their families. Women play critical roles in the rural economy and in agricultural production, although much of their work is underreported owing to the lack of sex-disaggregated data. Much of the work they do may sometimes be considered housework when it is actually fundamental to agricultural production and development. The unpaid work of women on farms owned by the family is often underestimated as well as undervalued.

Some States that have adopted policies to bring about gender equity have failed to implement those policies. The result is that customs and cultural attitudes that perpetuate female stereotypes are allowed to go unchecked. When States do implement policies aimed at gender equity, many women are unaware of their rights, owing to a lack of education and the resulting illiteracy, and therefore do not claim those rights under the law.

In many countries, gender-based discrimination is the cause of rural women's inability to own or inherit land. Even when women are allowed to own or lease land, such land is often difficult to farm and far from points of distribution so that markets become almost inaccessible.

We believe that investment in rural women's issues through education, training, better health facilities and decent work and living conditions will reap benefits to those States that make such issues a priority.

Climate change has brought about unprecedented natural disasters and is one of the most serious challenges faced by rural women, who are already suffering due to extreme poverty. We must realize the important link between climate change and gender as well as the significant easing of and adaptation to climate change that women can help to bring about. The role of rural women as agents of change can be significant as they face the challenges of a greatly different future. They cannot, however, face those challenges if they are ill-prepared owing to a lack of education and accessibility to land, technology and decent employment. Decent employment is a means of lifting rural women up from poverty, which will only grow more desperate as agricultural pursuits become less and less likely to sustain their families.

Unfortunately, when it comes to decent employment, there is a pattern of inequality, much of which stems from cultural discrimination. Women are often given the most menial of jobs, many with poor working conditions that offer low pay and long hours. This does not lead to equality, but instead perpetuates discrimination.

Ultimately, the cultural barriers that keep rural women in poverty and prevent their empowerment can be overcome through the education of girls and women. The Millennium Development Goals include the aim that equal opportunity be given to both boys and girls. Educated girls become educated women with greater competencies, resulting in healthier families and communities.

While the preceding discussion only begins to scratch the surface of the problems facing rural women, we feel the need to bring the subject of violence against women into the dialogue. Violence against women is a consequence of inequality between the sexes. At the launch of the UNiTE to End Violence against Women campaign in 2008, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon remarked that one out of every three women was likely to be beaten, coerced into sex or otherwise abused in her lifetime. We know that poverty and inadequate living conditions do much to aggravate the problem of violence against women. The problem is recognized to be more pervasive in developing countries where poverty levels are extreme. Breaking the cycle of deprivation and poverty can help to speed up the eradication of violence against women.

Keeping in mind the above-mentioned points, our recommendations are that:

- In all States, it is crucial to implement the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Beijing Platform for Action in order to improve the lives of rural woman and to empower them personally and economically. At the same time, such implementation would help to reduce poverty and sustain development.
- In line with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, special attention should be paid to ensure that rural women participate in all spheres of their lives, including the political aspects, especially where decision-making is concerned.
- All States should be urged to make provisions and policies that are gender-based and gender-sensitive. Education, training and awareness should be provided so that women can take full advantage of such policies and provisions. Training of Government and justice workers should not be a footnote to such polices, but an important component as well.
- The implementation of equality-based laws should be of utmost importance to all States. It is of no value to have laws that allow transgressors impunity.
- All issues of gender equality must be based on the assumption that women's rights are human rights. A human rights-based approach will allow rural women to enjoy the full range of such rights and will help to eliminate discrimination and violence against women.
- All States should make every effort to increase the accessibility of health-care facilities for rural women. The health-care facilities should include preventative care as well as palliative care.
- All States should be aware of the cost benefits of educating girls and women, which is an investment in the future and can only bring about better conditions for families, communities and countries.